

論文

Action Research Into Student-Teacher Conferences

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Introduction

The school is basically college preparatory with the main aim of sending its graduates to universities in the United States. The students, many of whom are non-native speakers of English, follow an American curriculum in an immersion style programme. The English Department is thus essentially concerned with an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) situation.

The class consists of one American, one Mexican, one Chinese, one Korean, two Pakistanis, three Indians, three Japanese (who have lived in the States for a period of time), and twelve Japanese. They are between the ages of fifteen to eighteen, and for all of them except one, English is a second language. In addition, most of them communicate in Japanese outside of school. The course textbook follows a process approach to writing. In general, L2 (learners for whom English is a second language) composition researchers have adopted L1 writing process designs and more often than not come up with the same results. Zamel (1983) provided evidence that supported the theme that has developed among L2 writing process studies, namely that L2 writers' composing processes are like L1 writers. However, as the area of universal composing skills is, at present, largely untouched, whether or not there are similarities or differences remains unclear. (See Raimes 1985 and 1987 for a contrasting view to that of Zamel.) In addition, American universities do seem to require papers to have a well organized format and style. Bearing this in mind, I have introduced, as part of the English class course, a requirement that students complete a number of assignments using my modified approach. This approach tries to consider the development of my students as writers, while keeping in

mind the fact that I have a responsibility to prepare them for their ultimate goal of studying at an American university. Thus, content and format are both covered.

The recursive element of the process approach is incorporated into the scheme. My students must write multiple drafts and constantly revise the content of their writing, with form receiving treatment only at the end of the process. Hopefully, within the constraints outlined, the students follow the steps recognized by Flower (1985 and 1989) which require them to plan extensively, define the rhetorical problem, place it in a larger context, make it operational, explore its parts, generate alternative solutions, and arrive at well supported conclusions. As Flower points out, the two key words in such an approach are thinking and process. Here thinking is identified with the higher order thinking skills involved with problem solving. So, ideally, conferences between drafts should be used as a way to bring all of the aforementioned considerations together and to promote a consciousness-raising effort designed to:

1. develop schemata for academic writing that will focus on content, format, and form.
2. create an awareness of the importance of both the writer and the reader, in the sense of helping the students with problem-solving strategies. Hinds (1987) refers to English as 'writer responsible' and claims that in Japan it is very often the responsibility of the reader (or listener) to understand what the author (speaker) intended. In my experience, this is reasonable. My students very often omit details they assume the reader will know, but this all too often leads to confusion.

3. establish the nature of errors. L2 writers should be aware that mistakes are in fact signs of growth rather than failure and reflect the student's attempt to approximate the target language. This comes from the Input Hypothesis of Krashen (1980 and 1981) and the subsequent Interlanguage Analysis approach to errors, Xu (1989).

There is no attempt to discourage the creative urge. However, there is an attempt to have the students modify their language, especially with regard to transitions and referents.

For the purposes of this study the students' writing will be graded holistically, however, since I assume that American professors will insist on formally correct papers, there will also be an analytical grade (see Appendix). The evaluation criteria are therefore very important. The evaluators and the students must have very clear definitions of the categories to be evaluated (see Appendix and Discussion).

I decided to examine research into both written comments and conferencing. Basically there is very little evidence to indicate that the careful annotation of students' written papers actually helps student writers improve. Studies do show that L1 writers' responses to written feedback are not as positive as L2 writers. Contrast, for example, the findings of Burkland and Grimm (1986), whose students (L1) showed hostility and resentment towards teacher suggestions, with Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) who show that L2 writers generally received the kind of written responses they wanted from their teachers. A study by Leki (1986) revealed that ESL students wanted to have every error marked and approved of written clues to enable them to correct their errors themselves. However, what is important here is what the students

actually do with the clues and comments. As Cohen (1987) points out the real problem with written comments is the lack of strategies on the part of the students for processing the feedback. Thus, having read the few studies I was able to find on conferencing, and trying to be realistic about the situation, I have come to agree with Cornicello (1980). He argues for the efficiency of talking to students about their writing over and above marking errors and writing comments. This leads me to the hypothesis that students who receive conferencing will show greater improvement in subsequent drafts of their writing than those who do not. This is a direct response to my current pedagogical challenge which is how to further improve the quality of my students expository writing. So the study will attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What happens during teacher-student conferences about their expository writing?
2. What effect do teacher-student conferences have on the subsequent drafts of students' papers?

NOTE: This study will examine (as much of the research on draft intervention has) the subsequent drafts of the same piece of writing, and thus there is no attempt to look at long term improvement in writing. Also, it should be mentioned that post-intervention drafts do not always show improvement Beach (1979). Backsliding is inevitable and "to expect that risk-taking and improvement can occur simultaneously is unrealistic and inappropriate" as Onore cited in Horvath (1984). Finally, I am in the unenviable position of being both coach and evaluator, and thus in danger of producing a sense of betrayal

in my students if the intervention does not produce good results and, of course, of biasing the results obtained.

Method

A. The Subjects

Ten of the twenty four students were chosen for the study on the basis of proficiency. The class was ranked according to the second quarter class rankings, recent TOEFL score rankings, and the students' grades for the previous writing assignment. Five high and five low proficiency students were selected. All of the students, including these ten, received an evaluation sheet with the number of errors for each category in the analytic section and written comments as well as a score out of five for each category in the holistic section (see Appendix for a blank example of the evaluation sheet). In addition, three randomly selected students from each of the high and low proficiency groups received conferencing between drafts.

B. Design

This (EXPLORATORY) action research was conducted while the entire class was set a typical five-paragraph essay task. The topic was provided, but the students themselves had to generate their own thesis statements. Ideally, there would be multiple drafts produced with two or three conferences, the last of which would concentrate on form. Unfortunately, due to time and situational constraints, only two drafts were completed with the one and only conference between these. It was hoped to address content, format, and form during the one conference. The pre- and post-treatment drafts were evaluated by two

evaluators. Serious differences in the scores were discussed.

C. The Conferences and the Teacher's Strategies

Previous attempts to improve the quality of my students' writing have included the correction of form errors, the marking of form and content errors or weaknesses, written comments on content, and short talks with students on content, format, and form. As these conferences were going to be a little different, it was decided to try and find some strategies that would help the teacher achieve the consciousness-raising goals. This was not too successful as this is an area which has largely been ignored by research. "Reformulation," after Cohen (1985), was considered to be appropriate for the students. This involves the re-writing/reading of a sentence retaining all the ideas but in the words of a native speaker. In this way, the student is provided with comprehensible input which fills the gap in his acquisition.

D. The Evaluations

All of the categories were defined to both students and evaluators. (see Appendix). As well as marking the student papers (not correcting) for analytical errors, each student received a filled-in evaluation sheet.

E. Analysis

The data for analysis included the tapes of the conferences and the raw scores. The tapes were used to shed light on the reality of what actually happened during the conferences. The Fisher Exact statistical method was used to establish whether the treatment had a significant effect on performance.

Results

The tapes of the conferences contained a number of completely silent periods and passages when the teacher read the student's writing out aloud with relevant comments, advice, and some discussion. Only categories from the holistic evaluation section were discussed and analyzed. The analytic errors were underlined, as they were with the rest of the class. The suitability of transitions and referents was pointed out, using lists on the conference table, and the omission or inclusion of them was discussed. The teacher tried some reformulation, but not that much, and also on a number of occasions the importance of the reader was stressed. It was pointed out that it is best to consider the reader as someone who knows nothing. In other words, everything must be explained very carefully. A lot of the advice and discussion revolved around the thesis statement in addition to the topic and concluding sentences. The lack of them in the first place, and then the relevance of subsequent supporting sentences.

One interesting facet of the conferences was the number of questions asked, by whom they were asked, and the nature of the answers that were given. Far more questions were asked by the teacher than the students, three of whom asked no questions at all. The largest number of questions asked of one student was nineteen, and the lowest was six. The three students who did ask questions asked four each.

Overall the conferences, except one, were rather serious in nature, and the teacher had very little time for either praise or criticism.

As can be seen in the Appendix the scores, more so for the analytical section, varied quite a lot in some cases (see Discussion).

So, it was decided to use only the holistic scores for the purpose of descriptive analysis. Due to the small number of students and because the design was somewhat unbalanced, the Fisher Exact statistical method was used to evaluate gains. The figures in the following contingency tables summarize the main results of the study. Statistically, none of these results are significant. The gains, reflected by looking at proficiency alone, do approach significance. (Note: for a +gain to be recorded in the tables below, a student's second draft score had to show at least a two-point increase over the first draft score.)

	+gain	no gain		+gain	no gain	
treatment	4	2		4	1	high proficiency
no treatment	1	3		1	4	low proficiency

	+gain	no gain		+gain	no gain	
high proficiency	3	0		1	1	high proficiency
low proficiency	1	2		0	2	low proficiency

with treatment no treatment

Discussion

a) Conferences

With the high proficiency students, the conferences were more meaningful, and generated a sense that something was being gained from them. Given the fact that the teacher usually did most of the speaking, these students: demonstrated that they understood what was being said to them, generally gave longer, more coherent answers to questions, answered questions much more frequently than the other

group, were able to maintain a dialogue on a specific point, and were able to ask specific questions about their writing.

In the end, with the lower proficiency students, it became the teacher's task to unravel exactly what the student meant through a question or questions which often had to be repeated several times. This group was asked almost twice as many questions as the high proficiency group (50-28). Consequently, the time available for discussion involving higher level thinking was limited. A question that seems to arise here is — what is the relationship between proficiency and motivation?

Although there is no real hard evidence, there may well have been a difference in the motivation of the students in the two groups as can be seen when contrasting the extracts from the transcripts of one high and one low proficiency student (see Appendix).

b) Evaluation and Analysis

After marking the first paper, in an effort to give the students a clearer indication of what they needed to look at, I added a number of categories to the analytical section. These included, omitted word(s), word order, and completely wrong word(s) or phrase(s). The other evaluator was informed of this and asked to also use them. Despite this attempt to make things clearer for everybody involved, as can be seen from the evaluations, this did not really work. A post-evaluation discussion revealed the reasons for the discrepancies in the scores. The evaluators found that, not only did they put items into different categories, but they also used different schemes for deducting points. Where, for example, should singular/plural mistakes go? How many points should a completely wrong phrase warrant deducting?

On the holistic side the evaluators did better, but there were slight differences of opinion on the definitions of thesis statements as well as topic and concluding sentences. A number of the papers were re-evaluated after discussions with concessions on both sides. It is worth noting that the four students whose writing proved most difficult to evaluate, and where greater variations in scores can be seen, were all from the poor proficiency group. Another concern that the evaluators' discussion brought up was that one individual was both teacher and evaluator. First drafts were, for example, far too strictly marked by this person. At this point, a third independent evaluation would have been best, but this unfortunately was not feasible. In the end, the analytical scores were discarded, and only the holistic scores were used for analysis. In order to give some validity to the study the evaluators' scores were averaged. The use of the holistic scores did make sense as the evidence from the tapes clearly showed a concentration on content, organization, coherence, and cohesion. If the conferences did provide anything towards improvement, it would be in the holistic evaluation section.

Although the statistical analysis did not provide any significant results, it is interesting that four out of the five students that did show improvement (a +2 gain), irrespective of whether they received conferencing or not, came from the high proficiency group (see Conclusions). Three out of these four also had significantly lower cases of error in the analytical section. This means it may be possible to say, as other research studies have, that rewriting in itself does promote improvement, but I would definitely qualify this by saying that, this is only for those who possess the strategies to make the improvement. In this respect, between-draft intervention may well help, particularly if

some consciousness-raising effort is made to arouse these strategies. The tapes identified two very different kinds of conference according to the proficiency level of the students. It may well be that rewriting is most effective with those learners who have acquired a threshold level of linguistic proficiency.

Conclusions

a) Replication

For a replication of this study, I would offer the following pointers.

1. Use a balanced design with a larger number of subjects, at least five for each of the four groups.
2. There should be careful consideration of the evaluation scheme to be used. (analytic vs. holistic or both? all of the categories in one or both sections?)
3. Ensure that the conferences focus on the evaluation criteria selected. And then depending on this selection, decide whether multiple drafts with a number of conferences that address different categories at the various stages of the process would be suitable.
4. A more careful consideration of the teacher's strategies may be required to maximize the benefits of conferencing time.
5. Record the conferences (consider using a video), and prepare complete transcripts for analysis.
6. Use two experienced, independent evaluators (not the teacher) and have a third available if necessary.
7. With the better design outlined above, an alternative statistical method could be used. An ANOVA (2x2) Design is suggested as

one that would offer a far greater insight into the raw scores obtained.

b) The Study

The only statistic that approached significance was the one that ignored the treatment and looked at gains reflected by proficiency. Thus, the conclusion must state that the major factor for an improvement in the quality of the subsequent draft was probably proficiency and not conferencing. One could also say that there appears to be a proficiency point below which, whether or not some form of feedback is used, improvement is unlikely to occur even if rewriting takes place. The gap in acquisition is too large and the strategies (or motivation?) to make improvements are not present. For such students more work at a basic linguistic level seems more appropriate than pushing them on to relatively complex writing tasks. However, maybe conferencing, as a means of providing comprehensible input, will eventually, over a period of time, help less proficient students improve their writing. As Krashen (1984) has pointed out, and I concur, we should not worry but be patient.

c) The research study benefits

Apart from the obvious insights (over a considerable period of time) into research and statistical methods used for applied linguistics, I believe this study has helped me to become a better teacher. My knowledge of ESL writing approaches has been significantly expanded. My awareness of just how difficult it is to evaluate L2 writers and to come up with a good evaluation scheme has been heightened. My understanding of what teacher-student conferences are has been

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improved, and I now have at my disposal some appropriate strategies to conduct them more effectively. I plan to continue to build on this experience, to modify and improve the evaluation scheme I have started to develop, and to 'fine tune' my conferencing strategies. This, hopefully, will enable me to help my students even more. I strongly recommend that each ESL teacher try a similar study with their own students. Even if it was done only once, it could (i) identify a useful method of feedback for your particular students and (ii) identify patterns of weaknesses for individual students which would form the basis of your efforts to improve their writing.

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APPENDIX

Analytic

1. Subject-verb agreement	
2. Tense continuity/accuracy	
3. Spelling	
4. Punctuation	
5. Capitalization	
6. Double margin	
7. Indented paragraphs	
8. Double-spaces	

Holistic

1 . Content	
2 . Organization	
3 . Cohesion	
4 . Coherence	

(size reduced)

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION

Analytic

- a . grammar
 - i . subject-verb agreement
 - ii . tense continuity/accuracy
- b . spelling
- c . punctuation
- d . capitalization
- e . format
 - i . double margin
 - ii . indented paragraphs
 - iii . double-spaced

For each error in categories a-d, one point will be deducted. For errors in category e, five points will be deducted.

Holistic

- a . The development of content, based on the creative selection and

usage of detail which focuses on the topic.

- b. Organization, which should include,
 - i. an introduction leading to a viable thesis statement,
 - ii. support paragraphs with relevant topic and concluding sentences, and
 - iii. a conclusion that either restates the thesis statement or summarizes the supporting paragraphs
- c. Cohesion, the use of appropriate transitions and referents and the lack of unnecessary repetitions
- d. Coherence, the sentence structure is varied and provides support for the thesis statement and/or topic sentence and the language is accurate and appropriately used without loss of meaning.

Each of the four categories above will be scored on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the highest possible score.

Table showing evaluation results.

Student	Analytic (1)		Analytic (2)		Holistic (1)		Holistic (2)	
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
*Yoon	-10	-3	-9	-4	15	14	16	17
*Hugo	-23	-23	-20	-20	12	11	15	17
*Kyoko	-48	-30	-39	-52	10	9	10	5
*Mizuka	-35	-37	-22	-37	7	7	9	4
Aditya	-36	-32	-39	-54	5	4	5	5
Maryam	-6	-9	-5	-5	15	13	18	17
*Anri	-31	-28	-31	-34	8	5	11	6
Haris	-5	-5	-3	-8	14	13	16	14
*Mimi	-10	-8	-10	-9	14	11	16	16
Mariko	-28	-36	-26	-37	7	5	10	4

A+B=The evaluators. *=Those students who received conferencing.

The analytic scores show the number of errors made.

The holistic scores are marks out of twenty.

Table showing holistic score gains.

	Evaluator's averaged First draft scores	Evaluator's averaged Second draft scores	Gains
Yoon	14.5	16.5	+2.0
*Hugo	11.5	16.0	+4.5
*Kyoko	9.5	7.5	−2.0
*Mizuka	7.0	6.5	−0.5
Aditya	4.5	5.0	+0.5
Maryam	14.0	17.5	+3.5
*Anri	6.5	8.5	+2.0
Haris	13.5	15.0	+1.5
*Mimi	12.5	16.0	+3.5
Mariko	6.0	7.0	+1.0

*=Those students who received conferencing

Only gains of +2.0 are entered into the contingency tables.

Extracts from the transcripts.

a) A poor proficiency student

S : ...flon...

T : ...flon gas...is 'making much worth' ...I don't understand. What
do you mean here?

S : People think car is useful...but...people start thinking about nature

...

T : ...right...

S : ...using flon gas is the most...

T : ...you mean in the sprays? What's that called? Freon...

S : ...freon?

T : Yes, freon gas...

S : ...is the most popular...no not popular...but the dearest thing in our life in our day.

T : Okay, just a moment.

(Teacher reads student paper aloud)

T : I don't think you should...why do you?... What becomes very comfortable?

S : By the modern technology... the lifestyle...

T : ...but you don't say that. You have to be more clear with this topic sentence...what are you talking about in this...you say 'comfortable' ...then what do you talk about? What three things are mentioned in this paragraph?

S : Inventions...technological...

T : ...you mention cars...

S : ...oh...cars...

T : ...then you switch to freon gas...and then you suddenly switch to nuclear bombs. Do you really think this should be in this essay?

S : Not really...but people know how dangerous it is...

b) A high proficiency student

S : ...it's all support this...but this is only the introduction...

T : ...so anyway you might be able to take some of this and put it into one of the support paragraphs. Now, what's the main theme...of this one?

S : ...that he's working...and depriving his family of his presence and lowering his standard of living...

T : ...okay, so let's make that paragraph one...okay?

S : ...yes...

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T : ... 'one of the multiple materialistic things they want to possess'

okay... can you see two different concepts here?

S : Yes.

T : What are they?

S : One that...that...the...corporations are using the people...

T : ...umm...

S : and one that the people are working...are working...without incentive.

T : ...right...and their only motive is...?

S : ...is money...

T : ...is money! So we've got here three paragraphs. You've got all the stuff here. You've just got to change the organization...

S : ...Yes.

T : And the details are good...they could be rewritten in perhaps a better way though.

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